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ABSTRACT

As part of the evaluation study of the Research and Development Utilization (RDU) program of the National Institute of Education (NIE), researchers interviewed 14 educational policy makers in the federal Department of Education, in the NIE, and on congressional committee staffs to discover their reactions to preliminary RDU findings. The four legislative and ten executive interviewees also ranked the importance of the seven RDU study issues and suggested how to make the study report's executive summary most relevant to policy making. Both legislative and executive policy makers agreed substantially on the seven issues' relative importance but disagreed sharply with the 1978 opinions of 25 state and federal policy makers on the relevance of RDU efficiency and the impact of educational research. Preliminary RDU findings indicated successful implementation of new practices, effective RDU intervention in schools, low RDU costs at the school level, and establishment of an RDU service delivery network. The policy makers saw 23 policy implications for these findings, in federal policy development, program development and refinement, directions for future research, and influence on federal legislation. They recommended that the executive summary be brief and target high educational decision-makers. (Author/RW)

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A STUDY OF THE R&D UTILIZATION PROGRAM

RDU Study and Its Policy Context: Perspectives of Educational Policy Makers

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Research and Development Utilization (RDU) program was established in June, 1976 as an action research project of the National Institute of Education. Operating until 1979, the program helped schools to clarify and solve local problems in the areas of basic skills and career education through the use of innovative R&D products. A major NIE objective in conducting the program was to learn more about the management of the local school improvement process and the role that externally developed R&D products can play in making it more effective. To this end, in November, 1977, Abt Associates Inc. was contracted to conduct a study of the RDU program which will continue until 1981.

NIE has identified three priority target groups for the results of the Abt Associates' study: managers of change programs (including school-based practitioners), researchers, and policy makers. Managers and practitioners need to know what really works if they are to solve educational problems. Researchers, particularly applied researchers, need accurate information about programs and their results in order to develop more refined concepts and models of change which will lead to improved practices in the future. Federal and state policy makers require information that will allow them to enact programs that will have the highest probability of impact, given limited financial resources and other constraints.

This memorandum deals with the information needs of these policy makers.* It describes their perceptions of the potential policy implications of the RDU study for executive and legislative decision-making related to education. It is based on interviews conducted in October, 1980 with leading educational policy makers in the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, and the Congress. Each official was asked to comment on how they might be influenced by the general issues driving the study and by the preliminary findings that have emerged after three years of research. These interviews were not Abt Associates' first effort at increasing the policy relevance of the RDU study--once before, in 1978, we queried many of these same policy makers to ascertain the

*Although the substance of this memorandum may be relevant to practitioners and researchers, the information needs of these audiences are dealt with more extensively in other reports of the Abt Associates study.

administrative and legislative context of the RDU study and to insure that the issues and questions on which the study planned to focus were appropriate. It is hoped that both sets of interviews will enhance the RDU study's contribution to the design and management of dissemination programs in education as well as to the organization and operation of future federal, state, and local efforts to improve schools.

2.0 RDU PROGRAM AND STUDY

2.1 Summary of RDU Program Objectives and Strategies

The National Institute of Education (NIE) established the RDU Program as a new demonstration effort in disseminating educational materials. While its overall goal was to help schools clarify and solve local problems, three specific objectives drove the design of the program:

- to help schools alleviate specific, locally defined problems in the areas of basic skills and career education;
- to help school and community personnel learn about the products of educational research and development; and
- to increase understanding of how the local program improvement process can be better managed and become more effective.

The strategy for achieving these objectives involved the funding of seven field designed projects that were to develop structures and procedures to organize a linkage system, or network of national, state, and other external resources, including information and human resources which would be made available to school personnel. Each project sought to develop a problem solving process whereby schools would systematically identify their problems and then select and implement research-based products or ideas to solve them.

In practice, the seven funded projects had several common features. First, each project initially emphasized the use of linking agents to coordinate the network of external resources that was developed at the project level. Second, each project developed a knowledge base, or pool of products or practices that were screened for quality, availability, and transferability. Finally, the core of the RDU strategy was to provide each participating

school or district with assistance in following a sequence of problem solving activities as shown in Exhibit 1.

The RDU program is unusual among federally funded dissemination strategies because of its dual commitment to the dissemination and use of R&D products and the development of local school capabilities to solve problems through the use of externally developed knowledge. Other federal programs have tended to concentrate on either product dissemination or local capacity building, but have not concentrated on an integrated model for combining the two.

Seven projects were supported by the RDU program for three years. Together, the seven projects served more than 300 schools. Projects were regionally distributed, and included the following:

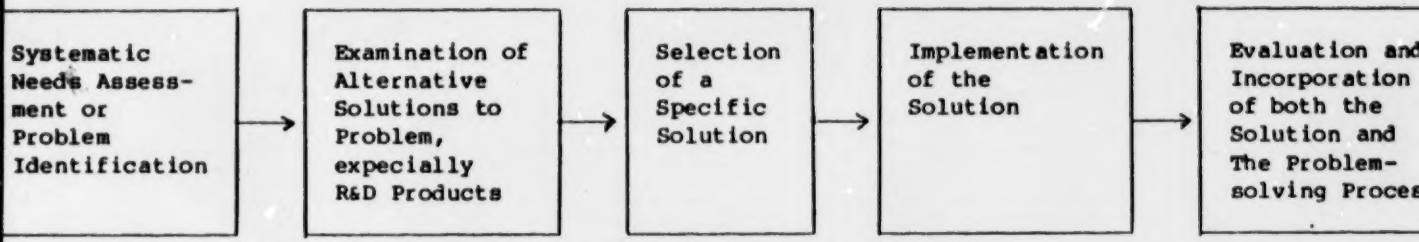
- The Northwest Reading Consortium, involving the state department of education and other agencies in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and Idaho;
- The National Education Association Inservice Education Project, operated in collaboration with the departments of education and corresponding state education associations in 12 states: Alabama, California, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming;
- The Consortium, operated by The NETWORK, a non-profit research and service organization that coordinated the efforts of agencies in six states: California, Connecticut, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Washington;
- The Georgia Research and Development Utilization Program;
- The Pennsylvania School Improvement Program;
- The Florida Linkage System; and
- The Michigan Career Education Dissemination Project. This project was operated by the state department of education as were the projects in Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Florida.

2.2 Abt Associates' Study of the RDU Program

In 1977, Abt Associates Inc., a social science research firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was contracted by NIE to conduct a study of the RDU program. The study was intended to contribute to the understanding of rational problem solving in local schools by examining how schools utilize externally developed R&D products to improve administrative procedures and instructional practices. The study also planned to increase the store

Exhibit 1

RDU PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS


Systematic Needs Assessment or Problem Identification
Examination of Alternative Solutions to Problem, expecially R&D Products
Selection of a Specific Solution
Implementation of the Solution
Evaluation and Incorporation of both the Solution and The Problem-solving Proces

of knowledge about the design, operation, and results of dissemination programs in education. It was to address seven major issues:

- how relationships are managed between various agencies which have the expertise and resources to help local schools solve problems;
- to what degree an intervention program such as RDU can help schools overcome barriers to successful problem solving (such as limited access to information or lack of planning, skills, etc.);
- to what degree the products of educational R&D are relevant to the problems and contexts of local schools;
- what the impact is of the products of educational R&D once they have been adopted and implemented;
- what factors contribute to the institutionalization of the RDU approach within a variety of organizations;
- how linking agents coordinate the flow of external resources to schools, and whether this helps the schools solve problems; and
- how efficient the RDU approach is in relation to approaches taken by other major dissemination efforts.*

Abt Associates' design for the RDU study involved a variety of data collection strategies. Over the last three years, these have included site visits to, telephone and in-person interviews with, and mail surveys of central RDU project staff, teachers and administrators, linking agents, NIE officials, and representatives of other federal programs for dissemination and local program improvement. In addition, project documents such as activity logs, budget and evaluation reports, and organization charts were used to address many of the research questions. Finally, a great quantity of anecdotal and descriptive data, plus site-specific analyses, were drawn from case studies produced by researchers who were employed for this purpose by each of the individual projects.

3.0 POLICY CONTEXT

The extent to which research influences policy depends not only on the quality of the research. Factors other than the explanatory power of the research design, validity and reliability of the instruments, statistical

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*NIE and Abt Associates formally eliminated this "inter-program" comparison from the RDU Study in mid-1978.

significance of the data, and timeliness of the final report often determine the degree to which and the ways in which research influences policy. Its influence is also affected by the institutional commitments and personal goals of the policy makers, their involvement in the planning and conduct of the research, and the relevance of the research findings to pending policy or programmatic decisions.

3.1 Role of the Policy Maker Interviews

With this in mind, Abt Associates has repeatedly sought out policy makers in the executive and legislative branches of federal and state government in order to discuss their concerns, information needs, and policy choices. During the spring of 1978, when the RDU study was new and mutable, we interviewed 25 educational policy makers about the study's context, potential relevance, and design. Their conclusions, which were reflected later that same year in a formal report,* helped shape the redesign of the overall study approved by NIE.

At the present time, the study is approaching completion, and we felt that it would again be useful to solicit the views of policy makers. The study's continuing policy relevance could be checked by sharing our preliminary findings with representative policy makers and exploring how the study might influence legislation, administrative regulations, program development, and other educational initiatives. Rather than affecting the study's design, we hoped that the ideas of the policy makers on this occasion would improve the study's remaining reports and the contribution of our findings to educational policy making.

3.2 Methodology

Staff members of NIE'S Program on Research and Educational Practice assisted us in the selection of potential interviewees within the federal government. In particular, we sought individuals who had experience in, or were familiar with, policy decisions relating to educational problem solving and the use and dissemination of educational knowledge. We also wanted the policy makers to represent a range of institutions and responsibilities,

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*Kent J. Chabotar and Diane G. Kell, An NIE Program and its Policy Context (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Abt Associates Inc., 1978).

including executive and legislative officials involved in policy development, program development, research and legislation. Such characteristics would be important in determining the: overall relevance of the RDU study to educational policy and program development; specific executive or legislative decisions that the study might influence; and a content and tone for the study reports that would be both technically sound and administratively persuasive.

The 14 policy makers who ultimately were interviewed included ten from the executive branch and four from the legislative. They included the Assistant Secretary for Legislation of the Department of Education, the Director and several Assistant Directors of the National Institute of Education, and Majority Counsels of the education committees in the Senate and House of Representatives. These informal discussions, lasting about an hour each, occurred in October, 1980. The full list of respondents is presented in the Appendix. It is important to note that, due to executive turnover and the establishment of the Department of Education, only four of the policy makers interviewed in 1980 had also been interviewed in 1978.

During the interviews, the policy makers were asked to address themselves to three topics:

- relevance of the seven study issues to educational decision-making;
- policy implications of preliminary findings; and the
- policy relevance of the forthcoming Executive Summary of the RDU Study.

4.0 RELEVANCE OF STUDY ISSUES TO EDUCATIONAL POLICY MAKING

Generally, the policy makers endorsed the RDU study as providing timely and useful information for educational policy and program development. They believed that technical and managerial decisions on knowledge dissemination activities, R&D product development and validation, and the general role of the federal government in school improvement efforts could be affected by the RDU study.

Specifically, the policy makers were asked to prioritize the seven issues guiding the RDU study in terms of how much they would value information about each one.* Our concern was to have the policy makers' preferences

*In two cases, this portion of the interview was inadvertently omitted. Therefore, this section is based on the views of twelve of the fourteen policy-makers--eight executive and four legislative.

before us when we decide on the relative coverage and emphasis to be given each issue in the final reports of the RDU study. The results of this inquiry are presented in two exhibits. One contrasts the rankings of the study issues by policy makers in 1980 with the earlier rankings in 1978, while the other exhibit disaggregates the 1980 federal rankings into ratings by executive branch officials and ratings by congressional staff. Both exhibits relfect the average rankings assigned to the various issues by each group of policy makers.

4.1 Rankings of Study Issues by Federal Policy Makers in 1978 and 1980

Exhibit 2 reveals some striking differences in the average rankings assigned to the issues by the 1978 and 1980 policy makers. For instance, whereas the 1978 group stressed the paramount importance of measuring product impact (Issue #4), the 1980 group ranked that particular issue much lower. While both groups valued impact data as the "bottom line" of whether or not the RDU program was successful, the 1980 group members were much more skeptical of the ability of any research project, including the RDU study, to attribute impacts to a specific intervention in situations where other programs or circumstances might have produced the apparent change.

In 1980, the policy makers placed the highest priority on knowing more about the relevance of R&D products to the problems and contexts of local schools (Issue #3). Many argued that federal dissemination activities, both current and contemplated, often make the unsupported assumption that R&D products exist to fit almost any problem and context and that only the products' lack of visibility and availability have allowed the problems to persist. In fact, the RDU study and others have shown that such an all-purpose product pool does not exist; for example, there is a very limited number of products relevant to problems in career education and basic skills at the secondary school level. This can lead to dissemination programs with unrealistic expectations on the part of program sponsors and clients, poor product choices or adaptations, and eventual disappointments that the program delivered far less than it originally promised.

Another issue assigned a higher ranking in 1980 than in 1978 concerned the management of relations among external resource agencies (Issue #1). The 1980 group put less emphasis on the pivotal role of the federal government in school improvement efforts and stressed the importance of local

Exhibit 2

RANKINGS OF STUDY ISSUES BY FEDERAL POLICY MAKERS IN 1978 AND 1980

Study Issues	Average Rankings by Federal Policy Makers 1978	Average Rankings by Federal Policy Makers 1980
1. How relations are managed between various agencies which have the expertise and resources to assist local schools in problem solving	5	2
2. To what degree an intervention program such as RDU can help schools overcome barriers to successful problem solving (limited access to information, lack of planning skills, etc.)	3	3
3. To what degree the products of educational R&D are relevant to the problems and contexts of local schools	7	1
4. What the impact is of the products of educational R&D once they have been adopted and implemented	1	4
5. What factors contribute to the institutionalization of the RDU approach within a variety of organizations	4	6
6. How linking agents coordinate the flow of external resources to schools, and whether this helps the schools solve problems	6	5
7. How efficient the RDU approach is in relation to approaches taken by other major dissemination efforts	2	7

NOTE: The issue assigned the highest average priority is ranked #1, the second highest #2, and so on.

resources, e.g. teacher education centers, universities and individual consultants. State education departments and other coordinating bodies could profit, the policy makers felt, by any information that the RDU study could provide on how best to establish and maintain networks of external resource agencies that were locally based but knowledgeable about the "state of the art" in school improvement efforts nationally.

However, an even larger shift between 1978 and 1980 occurred with reference to the value of information about the relative efficiency of the RDU approach (Issue #7); it fell from being ranked second highest in 1978 to seventh and last in 1980. Due to financial constraints, NIE and Abt Associates had officially dropped a comparison of the RDU program with other major federal dissemination efforts from the RDU study after the first round of policy maker interviews had been completed in 1978. This issue was inserted in the 1980 interviews to detect any changes in the policy makers' perceptions of its importance. Some policy makers observed that they lost interest in this issue because the RDU program had ended, its mission and organization was not comparable to other dissemination efforts, and the other efforts were already being studied by The NETWORK as part of another contract.

4.2 Rankings of Study Issues by Federal Executive and Legislative Policy Makers in 1980

Exhibit 3 contrasts the 1980 rankings of executive and legislative decision-makers. The Department of Education (especially the National Institute of Education) represented the executive branch in the 1980 interviews, whereas the legislative representatives were staff members of the House Committee on Education and Labor and the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

There was remarkable consistency between the executive and legislative policy makers in ranking the study issues. Both groups placed the highest priority on assessing the relevance of R&D products to local schools (Issue #3). They also valued information about the management of external resource networks (Issue #1), overcoming barriers to successful problem-solving (Issue #2), and the impact of R&D products once they have been implemented (Issue #4). Low priority was assigned to data about the institutionalization of the RDU approach (Issue #5), due mainly to a general consensus that not enough time had passed since the RDU program ended to be able to measure institutionalization.

Exhibit 3

RANKINGS OF STUDY ISSUES BY FEDERAL EXECUTIVE LEGISLATIVE POLICY MAKERS IN 1980

Study Issues	Average Rankings by Executive Policy Makers 1980	Average Rankings by Legislative Policy Makers 1980
1. How relations are managed between various agencies which have the expertise and resources to assist local schools in problem solving	2	3
2. To what degree an intervention program such as RDU can help schools overcome barriers to successful problem solving (limited access to information, lack of planning skills, etc.)	4	2
3. To what degree the products of educational R&D are relevant to the problems and contexts of local schools	1	1
4. What the impact is of the products of educational R&D once they have been adopted and implemented	3	4
5. What factors contribute to the institutionalization of the RDU approach within a variety of organizations	5	7
6. How linking agents coordinate the flow of external resources to schools, and whether this helps the schools solve problems	6	5
7. How efficient the RDU approach is in relation to approaches taken by other major dissemination efforts	7	6

Although the executive and legislative rankings were very similar, the policy makers often offered different reasons for preferring certain issues over others. Executive branch officials tended to stress the programmatic and research implications of the issues, while their legislative counterparts, predictably, emphasized impacts on authorization and appropriations bills. For example, with reference to the issue of overcoming barriers to successful problem solving (Issue #2), policy makers from the executive branch focused on the need for information on how to improve the use of advisory panels in existing programs (especially Title I), while legislative policy makers saw the ramifications of this issue on the establishment and use of the school site councils envisioned in the pending Youth Incentives Act.

5.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

While the final results of the RDU study will not be available until the spring of 1981, some preliminary findings were already evident when the policy makers were interviewed for this memorandum. Among the positive findings were the significant number of local school sites which successfully implemented new programs or practices, the low costs of the RDU program at the site level, and improvements reported by teachers in their curricula and classroom practices as well as in pupil attitudes and behaviors as a result of their RDU efforts. Negative outcomes included the lack of externally validated products in some significant areas, the low rate of adoption of R&D products, a general failure to institutionalize key features of the problem solving process, and the transience of the educational networks designed to deliver services to the schools. In order to give the policymakers an opportunity to think about the policy implicatinos of the preliminary findings, the list of findings was shared with them in advance of the interviews. This section describes these preliminary findings and then the policy makers' reactions to them.

5.1 Preliminary Findings of RDU Study

The preliminary findings cover four areas of the RDU program: school outcomes, factors affecting school-level outcomes, program costs at the local school level, and the design and management of educational networks for school improvement.

School Outcomes

School outcomes include the achievement of both program goals (i.e., the successful completion of a problem solving process, and adoption and implementation of externally developed new school practices) and spinoff effects (i.e., organizational changes--such as changes in decision making practices or the creation of new roles--and personal benefits to participating staff). The implementation of externally developed programs or practices was widely achieved, and there is a high expectation of their continued use; but fostering the continued use of an improved problem solving process is more difficult. Spinoff effects constitute a major area of RDU "success."

- Approximately 75% of the participating local school sites remained in the program and successfully adopted and implemented new programs or practices. In those schools 78% of the teachers surveyed in 1979 indicated that they were using the product currently, and almost all of these reported that they would continue its use in the future.

- Most schools implemented new programs or practices from their projects' approved "product pool." Products developed in local schools with federal support for dissemination and training (e.g., those supported by the National Diffusion Network) were more widely adopted than "R&D" products. The low rate of adoption of R&D products does not mean that R&D products are not useful to schools. Reasons for low R&D adoption include less easy access to materials or to training for implementation.

- From all sources--practices or research based--there appears to be a lack of externally validated products in some significant areas (i.e., basic skills at the secondary level, and career education products).

- Teachers generally rated the quality of the new programs or practices they adopted very highly, and the new practices were rated as having significant impacts on the school. For example, 68% reported that the curriculum improved; 70% reported improved materials; and 46% reported improved classroom management practices. Moreover, positive impacts on pupil attitudes, behavior and performance were reported by teachers: 60% reported great or some improvement as a result of the new program or practices.

- Principals report substantial efforts to ensure the schools' continued use of the new programs or practices. Most principals indicate that the new programs or practices have been formally incorporated into curriculum plans. A majority of

principals also report that they will look to R&D resources for programs and materials in the future as means of solving local school problems;

- In a large proportion of the schools, the problem solving process was viewed as even more valuable than the new program or practice adopted. Teachers who actively participated on the local problem solving teams more frequently reported personal growth in leadership skills, self-confidence and job satisfaction, and understanding of the school. Overall, greatest personal benefits were reported by the young, elementary school teachers, and by teachers using the adopted programs or practices. In some schools, the process even led to more major organization changes.

- However, institutionalization of key features of the process (i.e., reliance on external resources, use of teams with high levels of effort, strong teacher participation) rarely occurred. Schools did not generally acquire the internal capacity and commitment to repeat a problem solving process like that used in the RDU program.

Factors Affecting School Level Outcomes

Various features of the RDU intervention were found to affect school outcomes positively. These program effects were as strong as or stronger than site characteristics (such as previous experience with innovative programs).

- The characteristics of the adopted program or practice had the strongest effects of any features of the RDU intervention. Field tested programs and those which were difficult to implement or which required extensive changes in the school resulted in highest reported levels of teacher satisfaction and impact on pupils. Locally developed products and those which required extensive local adaptation before implementation were less effective in producing these school outcomes.

- Participation and influence of a broadly representative school based problem solving team with decision-making authority were also significant in achieving strong program impacts on schools. Particularly important elements of the team activity were:

  - an emphasis on building consensus and a feeling of program "ownership" through communication with teachers not on the team;
  - a strongly committed team leader based in the school or district;
  - adequate attention to planning for implementation;
  - strong but tractful intervention by the linking agent who could connect the school with necessary resources.

- A key factor in mobilizing resources for the school level problem solving process--and the greatest single category of expenditures to support change--is the availability of staff release time for teachers on the problem solving team.

- Support from the school administrator is important to the success of the effort, although active administrator involvement is more critical in later stages of the problem solving process. Modest levels of principal commitment can be counter-balanced by support from the district office. Turnover in administrators frequently accounted for fluctuating levels of implementation and continuation.

Program Costs at the Local School Level

The RDU program did not incur significant costs at the school level. Although the provision of federal funds was an important stimulus to participation in the RDU program, the schools relied more heavily on district funds and on the contributed time of principals and teachers to support their RDU effort.

- Program costs were generally low at the school level. Few schools had cash outlays in excess of $5,000, including funds provided by the RDU program.

- Each dollar of federal funds generated additional resources at the school level worth about $5. These "in-kind contributions" included uncompensated released time of participating teachers, district funds for materials and travel, and the use of local facilities and equipment. They also included funds drawn from other federal programs operating at the schools, e.g., Title I, Title IV-C, NDN, etc.

- Personnel costs accounted for 85% of the total resources used by schools participating in the RDU program. Most of these personnel costs represented the time spent by administrators and teachers in group brainstorming, materials development, research reporting, and program administration.

- In addition to funding given directly to the schools, approximately $16,000 in federal funds were used to support each school's participation in the program. This estimate excludes research and start-up costs of administering the projects, but includes general administrative costs of the RDU projects, the services of the linking agents and other consultants paid for by the project, and the services of the knowledge base staff.

- In addition to funding given directly to the schools, approximately $16,000 in federal funds were used to support each school's participation in the program. This estimate excludes research and start-up costs of administering the projects, but includes general administrative costs of the RDU projects, the services of the linking agents and other consultants paid for by the project, and the services of the knowledge base staff.

Design and Management of Educational Networks for School Improvement

The seven RDU projects each established a network of organizations that operated effectively in delivering services to schools. These networks involved extensive relationships between local schools, intermediate educational agencies (BOCES, county offices, etc.), state departments of education, universities and independent educational organizations. The educational networks proved, however, to be fragile and tended to revert to previous practices at the end of the program. Institutionalization of new services or practices based on the RDU program tended to occur within a specific organization; institutionalization of new inter-organizational linkages occurred less frequently.

- In all of the RDU projects, selected materials developed or skills and learning acquired were successfully incorporated into ongoing dissemination activities within the sponsoring agencies.

- Statewide networks were easier to manage and sustain than those organized on a regional or national level.

- Networks that brought together many dissimilar organizations tended to be more difficult to manage and sustain. A particular problem for these networks was the clarification of roles and responsibilities for each different type of organization.

- The timeline of the RDU demonstration was three years. For some projects (such as projects with complicated networks, or those which involved organizations that had not previously worked together) this time was too short to fully demonstrate the potential of the network for delivering services.

- A major management dilemma for demonstration programs of this type is where the project should be located within the sponsoring agency. Many RDU projects were placed in research units, or other departments that could not provide a permanent basis for continuation. Projects located in operating program divisions, however, were subject to more pressure to emphasize service rather than demonstration objectives.

- Selecting a project director from outside the sponsoring agency (or one who is poorly integrated in the sponsoring agency) occurs frequently in demonstration projects. The project director's lack of familiarity with the practices and norms of the sponsoring agency often impedes the demonstration's integration with the ongoing activities of the agency and its longer-term prospects for continuation and institutionalization.

- Locating "linking agents" or facilitators in Intermediate Education Agencies proximate to the client schools facilitates effective service delivery and responsiveness by making them more accessible as well as more familiar with the scools' needs and contexts. At the same time, it increases problems of project management, since linking agents scattered over a wide geographical area are more difficult to supervise and coordinate than agents housed in or near a project's central headquarters.

- The types of formal training that were typically provided to educational linking agents and facilitators had little impact upon job satisfaction and performance. More important is the development of appropriate job descriptions and communication structures to reduce conflict between client and management expectations.

5.2 Policy Implications

The preliminary findings definitely seemed to interest the policy makers. Given the set of findings in advance of the interviews, the policy makers were able to identify policy implications, most of which involved simple adjustments to existing programs, rather than massive changes or wholly new policy initiatives. However, many policy makers tended to talk in very general terms about the RDU study and were able, for the most part, to relate only a few preliminary findings to specific aspects of their work. What policy implications they saw and fell into four categories: policy development, program development, research, and legislation.

Policy Development

One of the critical issues around the establishment of the Department of Education was the appropriate role for the federal government in education. It should be noted that the policy maker interviews occurred a few days before the 1980 natinal elections. The Reagan campaign had been arguing for a reduced federal role in educational policy making and for dismantling the Department of Education. It is not surprising, therefore, that several policy makers chose to examine the implications of the RDU study for federalism in education.

- A preliminary finding was that "institutionalizaiton of the process rarely occured," although the R&D products themselves seemed to persist after the RDU program ended. Besides being disappointing, these results prompted questions about how the federal government can insure that the funds it invests in local education projects can achieve long-term impacts on school management and decision making. Some policy makers contended that local projects are too dependent on federal funds (an argument somewhat negated by the RDU finding that every $1 in federal funds leveraged $5 in local resources), and are reluctant to continue the project once federal involvement ceases.

- The RDU finding that locally-based external resource agencies were important factors in program success led a few policy makers to conclude that federal funds should be channeled through teacher education centers, universities, and the like, since these agencies seem to be effective change agents and are likely to be around even after the federal program ends. Building a local capacity in providing external resources to schools should receive a higher priority, they felt.

- Two policy makers contended that the issue of appropriate channels for federal aid to education had policy implications beyond just institutionalization of a product or process. Within the Department of Education, the dilemma is whether federal funds should be passed through intermediate agencies to recipient institutions (as is the case in Title IV-C where state education departments turn federal funds over to local school districts) or should be awarded directly to the institutions that will use them (in a manner similar to the FIPSE program). The RDU study, they observed, has findings that will support both sides of the argument.

- The RDU study uncovered multiple federal programs at almost all RDU sites, including NDN, IV-C, Title I, etc. In addition to complicating Abt Associates' attribution of perceived school outcomes to the RDU intervention, the "federal overload," as one policy maker put it, contributes to duplication of services, overlapping and competing administrative structures and little coordination of effort. It also exaggerates the power of the federal government in school decision making. In the minds of a few policy makers, this again raised the perennial issue of whether federal funds now allocated on a categorical basis should be converted into bloc grants whose expenditure is largely left to the recipient agency. While accountability and federal control would be lessened, the policy makers conceded, consolidation might facilitate better planning, more flexibility in resource use, and a less obtrusive federal role.

Program Development

The policy makers pointed out several examples of how the RDU study's preliminary findings might influence future program development, particularly in knowledge dissemination and utilization. R&D projects, linking agents, and in-service activities were among the topics surfaced during the interviews. The policy makers emphasized, however, that program development would not necessarily mean the mounting of new programs as much as refinements in existing programs. New programs have considerable start-up costs and often fail to capitalize on previous experinece and established network.

- An issue raised during the 1978 series of policy maker interviews was the applicability of an agricultural "extension agent" model to education in which a national communication network could be established to inform educational practitioners about innovative educational products. Although this model is not as prominent in 1980, the policy makers were still interested by the RDU finding that the "assistance of external linking agents increased the impact of the program on the school as a whole, and the predicted continuation of aspects of the problem solving process." Since another RDU finding was that the proximity of the linking agent to the schools facilitated service delivery, an executive policy maker observed that this probably supported the extension agent model because the extension agent is also headquartered locally and not sent out from a state capital or Washington, D.C.

- However, despite the preliminary findings, skepticism about the value of linking agents is prevalent, as one congressional staff member argues that these linking agents should not be federally funded, even in NIE dissemination programs, because the federal government has already "picked up the tab" for the product or process being disseminated, and "if the states want linking agents, they should pay for them."

- The RDU finding of a lack of externally validated products in career education and in-service education seemed to policy makers to have several programmatic implications. Are the validation standards set by JDRP and others relevant to the needs and contexts of local schools? Can we really validate products in career education or in-service? What other forms of validation need to be considered?

- The general lack of R&D products relevant to secondary schools also troubled many policy makers who urged that this level be given greater attention in future product development efforts.

- The availability of training for implementation was found by the RDU study to be a key factor in product adoption. Products developed in local schools with

federal support for dissemination and training (e.g. NDN) were more widely adopted than R&D products. A few policy makers stressed the importance of connecting dissemination with staff development and the futility of expecting products to be adopted based on their "good looks" alone. Staff development aids dissemination by selling innovation, allaying staff fears about product complexity, and building a team spirit necessary for successful implementation of the product being disseminated. Likewise, dissemination promotes staff development by serving as a convenient, relatively inexpensive, occasion for staff meetings (both formal and informal) that may improve not only staff skills in the use of a particular product, but also interpersonal awareness and group communication. The Department of Education seems to have recognized this relationship in the establishment of a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Dissemination and Professional aimprovement.

- Several policy makers thought that any attempt to link dissemination with staff development should consider the RDU finding of the importance of providing teachers with adequate released time to participate in these activities.

- The negative effects of the short timeline allotted to the RDU program (3 years) disturbed two of the policy makers. Both felt that most federal programs (and not only in education) expect results too quickly and fail to provide for adequate start-up time for planning and organizing. Rushing a program's implementation only impairs the service and threatens the program's credibility in the short and long term.

- The RDU Study found that support from the school administrator is important to the success of the RDU effort, particularly in the later stages of the problem solving process. According to an executive policy maker, this finding is consistent with other research with respect to the critical role of the principal or other school administrator in knowledge utilization and problem solving and reinforces the need for, and may influence the content of, the Administrator Training Program now being considered by the Department of Education.

Research

The RDU program was envisioned as an "action research" project that would not only help schools solve locally defined problems but also contribute to existing knowledge about how schools use rational problem solving techniques in selecting and implementing externally developed R&D products. Since research is almost never intended to have the "final word" on the subject, the RDU study should have implications for the research agenda of the

Department of Education, especially in the National Institute of Education. The study's preliminary findings seemed to stimulate a few policy makers into thinking of areas which should be emphasized in our final report if possible, or where future research projects could build on the RDU experience.

- The RDU study pointed to a number of characteristics that seemed to encourage schools to adopt particular R&D products, e.g. availability of training, cost and time demands, and access to supplementary materials. More research needs to be done on which product characteristics most interest teachers since they will be the ones most responsible for implementation and student contact. Also, the R&D products developed by the labs tended to be more expensive than those developed elsewhere--how critical is the cost factor in the adaptation decision?

- The RDU program used seven different delivery systems or projects in serving and researching schools. The projects varied in their leadership, organizational nesting and structure, use of intermediate resource agencies and linking agents, problem solving strategies, and other components. Is there an "ideal" project in terms of successful implementation and institutionalization of the problem solving process? Of R&D products?

- Linking agents played a key role in the RDU program. What makes a successful linking agent--education, experience, personal traits, amount of initiative taken? Should linking agents be used to foster staff development, access external resources, alter internal decision making processes?

- The RDU study is the latest in a series of major federal efforts to study knowledge dissemination and educational change. Its most notable predecessor is the RAND change agent study. How do these two studies relate? What do they tell us about the efficacy of school improvement efforts?

- Over $16,000 in federal funds were used to support each school's participation in the RDU program. How does this funding level compare with other federal dissemination programs? Does any relationship exist between program costs and outcomes?

Legislation

Policy makers drawn from the staffs of Congressional committees were most definitely interested in the potential impact of RDU study findings on pending educational legislation. No one claimed that the RDU study would profoundly alter any appropriations or authorization bills, but they did see a few instances of likely influence.

- According to the policy makers, the Youth Incentives Act now pending in the Congress could be most influenced by the RDU study. Its current version emphasizes the use of state and local education agencies to improve the employment prospects of economically poor and educationally disadvantaged high school students through, among other things, a sustained effort at improving their basic skills. The policy makers were concerned by the RDU study finding that there were so few externally validated R&D products in career education or basic skills that fit secondary schools. This problem would have to be reflected in the legislation, they felt, by instructional strategies that were not dependent upon R&D products or by support for the development of R&D products relevant to the needs and contexts of high school students.

- The RDU study might prompt Congress to reconsider its elimination from the Act of a 15% set-aside of teacher training funds in view of the apparently close connection between knowledge utilization and professional development activities.

- The Youth Incentives Act might also be affected by the findings about local problem solving teams. "School site councils" are supposed to advise local educators on how to implement the Act. How can these councils be made more effective and influential instead of serving, like many advisory panels, as mere "window dressing?"

- Findings about local problem solving teams might also affect the Title I Advisory Councils and the advisory councils established under the Vocational Education Act.

- Two titles of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act were considered by the policy makers to be potentially affected by the RDU study. The finding about the lack of R&D products for secondary schools could prompt discussions of the extension of Title I to high schools, including the appointment of Title I teachers. Title II sponsors demonstration programs in the basic skills--has the RDU study added enough new knowledge to what is known about encouraging basic skills improvement to affect the mission or operations of Title II?

- Generally speaking, the policy makers observed that the RDU findings could be used to improve the dissemination component of any legislation with a school improvement focus.

6.0 ENHANCING THE POLICY RELEVANCE OF THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As currently envisioned, the Executive Summary will be a synopsis of the major findings and policy implications of the RDU Study. It will rely on prior data collection and analysis to summarize what we have learned

about the RDU program and, to a limited extent, how that information might contribute to educational research and decision making. Given such a model, the policy makers recommended that the Executive Summary should be:

- targeted at the highest levels of decision making, e.g. the top management of the Department of Education and the chairmen and staff directors of education committees in the House and Senate;
- kept as brief as possible (no more than 15-20 pages) in order to encourage these executives to read it;
- organized either around significant themes (local action teams, linking agents, interorganizational networks, etc.) or major audiences (policy makers, researchers, and practitioners) so that readers can locate and concentrate on topics that most interest them.
- focused on positive aspects of the RDU program that could be replicated elsewhere; and
- concerned with recommending future agendas for both practice and research.

However, the results of the policy maker interviews also suggested that an Executive Summary per se may not be the most effective dissemination vehicle for the RDU study. It may not be detailed or assertive enough to influence educational policy making. This judgment is based on several factors:

- Until they had read the preliminary findings, most of the policy makers in the Department of Education had very little if any knowledge of the RDU program. This problem is likely to be compounded by the imminent change in Administrations. Moreover, even after they had studied the findings, many policy makers were able to discuss its policy relevance only in general terms. They offered detailed policy implications only after prodding by the Abt Associates' interviewers. The most effective technique seemed to be for the policy makers to surface a pending programmatic or legislative decision and then discuss with the Abt interviewer which RDU findings might be applicable. Few could take the findings as is and apply them to educational policy in any systemmatic manner. By no means should this be interpreted as a criticism of the policy makers. It is more a recognition of the low visibility that a study of the RDU program can naturally command in the turbulent policy environment in which these officials operate.
- Another indication of the RDU study's difficulty in attracting attention is the fact that several senior officials in the Department of Education suggested by NIE and contacted

by Abt Associates either refused to be interviewed or cancelled after they had read the findings (usually because the "RDU program has no relevance for me.").

- An executive summary organized around the major reports or components of the RDU study may be ineffective in stimulating interest and utilization of its findings. The policy maker interviews demonstrated that policy makers tend to think more definitively in terms of concrete policy initiatives (ESEA, Youth Incentives, NDN, etc.) than in terms of abstractions like linking agents or interorganizational networks.

For these reasons, several policy makers (and the Abt Associates interviewers) suggested that serious consideration ought to be given to alternative ways of summarizing the results of the RDU study. Some recommended that we discard a formal written report in favor of an informal conference for practitioners, researchers and policy makers organized around the RDU study. Another option was to prepare congressional testimony for the Department of Education to deliver at the appropriate hearings.

One alternative that was particularly interesting was to transform the "Executive Summary" from an overview of the study's principal findings into an "Executive Report" organized around specific executive or legislative policy initiatives. There would still be a summary of the RDU study's methodology and conclusions, but the focus would be on utilization. For example, there would be separate sections on the Youth Incentives Act, ESEA, Vocational Education Act, NIE/ED staff development efforts, and other policies explaining in detail how their provisions would be supported or challenged by the RDU study. Such an approach would clarify exactly how the RDU study might be used in policy or program development instead of publishing a list of major findings and expecting policy makers to infer their policy implications. It would, in fact, "sell" the importance and policy relevance of the RDU study and, by extension, the RDU program itself.

7.0 FUTURE PLANS FOR THE STUDY

The policy maker interviews were most helpful in thinking about the scope and content of the remaining reports of the RDU study. It also assisted in defining the target audiences for the audiences for the reports.

In the months ahead, Abt Associates expects to utilize the perspectives of these officials in the development of the:

- Final Report to Practitioners;
- Executive Summary/Report of RDU Study; and the
- Final Report of the RDU Study.

APPENDIX

POLICY MAKER INTERVIEWEES

October, 1980

Mary Jo Bane, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Planning and Analysis, Department of Education;

William Clohan, Assistant Education Counsel, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives;

Lois-Ellin Data, Acting Director, Teaching and Learning, National Institute of Education;

William Ellis, Assistant Director, National Institute of Education;

David Evans, Majority Staff, Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, U.S. Senate;

Jean Frohlicher,* Counsel, Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, U.S. Senate;

Milton Goldberg, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Dissemination and Professional Improvement, Department of Education;

John F. Jennings,* Counsel, Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, U.S. House of Representatives;

Michael Kane, Assistant Director, National Institute of Education;

Martha Keys, Assistant Secretary for Legislation, Department of Education;

Robert McMeekin, Office of the Director, National Institute of Education;

P. Michael Timpane,* Director, National Institute of Education;

Marc Tucker,* Acting Director, Office of Program Management, National Institute of Education; and

Eunice Turk, Acting Director, Dissemination and Improvement of Practice, National Institute of Education;

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*Also interviewed in 1978.